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UNITARIAN BELIEF

X. CONVERSION AND REGENERATION

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SERMONS

OF

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CONVERSION AND REGENERATION.*

ORTHODOXY knows only two states in which man can be found. Man is either in the natural state, and then he is totally depraved, or he is in the supernatural state, in which the chain of sin has been broken. He is either impenitent or penitent, either unregenerate or regenerate, unconverted or converted, a sinner or a saint.

There is no gradation, no shading off, no twilight between this midnight gloom and mid-day splendor. To the common eye, and in the judgment of their friends and neighbors, the people who enter a church seem of all degrees of goodness; and every one has good and bad qualities mixed up together in his character. But, as the Orthodox minister looks at them from the pulpit, they instantly fall into two classes, and become "my impenitent hearers" and "my penitent hearers."

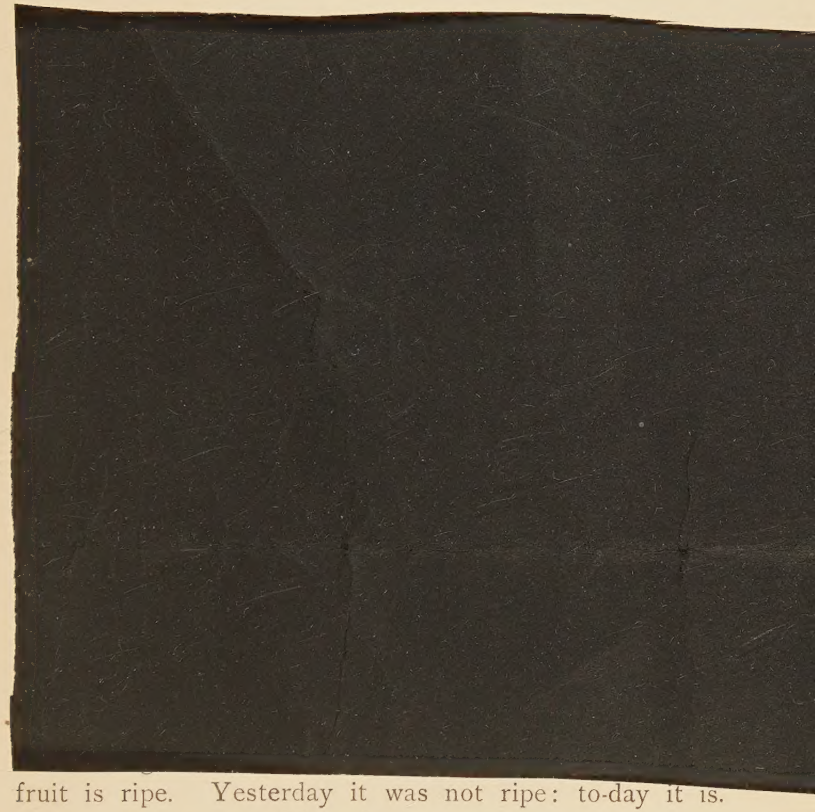
Again, the change from one state to the other is assumed to be so distinct and marked that he who runs may read. One may say to another, "*Where were you converted?*" just as he may say, "*Where did you go to college?*" "Where were you born?" said an English bishop to Somerville, the Methodist preacher. "In Dublin and Liverpool," he answered. "Were you born in *two* places?" said the bishop. "Art thou a master in Israel, and knowest not these things?" replied Somerville.

*This is an extract from Chapter VII. of "Orthodoxy: Its Truths and Errors."

On the other hand, it is quite common among liberal Christians to doubt the reality or deny the importance of such changes. With them the Christian life consists, not in change, but in progress. In the Christian course, Orthodoxy lays the main stress on the beginning; liberal Christianity, on the progress. The one wishes you to begin the journey, without seeming to care whether you go forward: the other urges you to go forward, without inquiring whether you have begun to go. According to one, Christianity is a *crisis;* according to the other, a *development.*

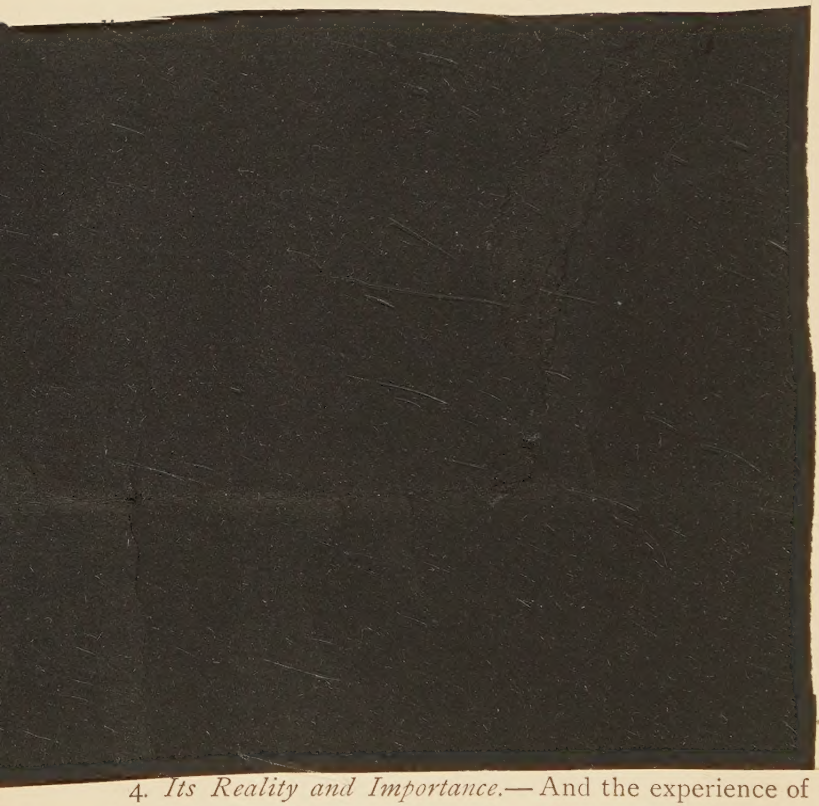
2. *Crisis and Development.*— Is there any truth in this Orthodox view of man? anything essential, substantial, vital? Is there any formal error? If there is, what is it? Is Christianity crisis or development, or both?

Common sense and analogies of common life must answer, "Both." If Christianity is a life, it must begin with a birth; if a journey, it cannot be taken unless we set out; if an education, we must determine to begin the education; if labor in God's vineyard, we must go into the vineyard and begin. There are only two classes,— those who are alive and those who are not alive; those who are taking the journey and those who have not yet set out; those who are studying and those who have not yet begun to study; those who are at work for God and those who are standing idle. The distinction between the two classes seems, therefore, substantial and real. It does not follow that these two classes can be distinguished so easily by the eye of man, but they certainly can by the eye of God. Nor does this primary distinction interfere with other distinctions and many degrees of difference,— greater or less differences and degrees of progress, useful-



fruit is ripe. Yesterday it was not ripe: to-day it is. This is the third crisis. And so, in human life, long periods of development terminate in critical hours,— the seeds of another long growth. So it is in other things; so also in religion.

3. *Nature of the Change.*— The next position of Orthodoxy is that man, in the second or regenerate state, is a new creature. It asserts the change to be entire and radical, and the difference immense. Not only the whole



4. *Its Reality and Importance.*— And the experience of the whole church, the biographies of the saints in every denomination, assure us of the substantial truth of this description. Even in churches which are not Orthodox, — churches like our own, which insist more upon development than upon crisis,— observation verifies this description. Even those who do not expect such a change nor believe in it often come to it unexpectedly. In the course of each one's experience as a Christian

minister, though he may never have insisted on the importance of sudden changes, and though he may be no revival preacher, he must have known numerous instances of those who seem to have passed from death to life in the course of a day or an hour. And is not this change, either sudden or gradual, that which makes Christianity a gospel? It is the good news, not of a future and distant heaven, but of a present heaven,— a heaven not outward, but inward; a present salvation from the power of sin; a present relief from the sense of guilt; a present joy and peace in believing; happiness in serving God; sympathy and good will to man instead of envy and uncharitableness; peace with God, with man, with ourselves, with our condition and circumstances.

That such a state is possible for every human being who desires it is the good news which Christ brings; and the experience of ten thousand times ten thousand grateful hearts declares that it is a reality.

5. *Is it the Work of God or of the Man himself? Orthodox Difficulty.*— But now comes a difficulty in the Orthodox statement. Orthodoxy declares that this regenerate state is the result of faith, not of works; and that faith is the gift of God; and herein Orthodoxy follows the Script ure. Yet Orthodoxy calls upon us to repent and be converted, that our sins may be blotted out; and herein likewise Orthodoxy follows the Scripture. Is, then, conversion an experience or is it an action? Is it something God gives or something which he commands? Is it a duty to be done or a gift to be received? Is it submission to his will or joy in his love? a new life of obedience or a new heart of faith? If it is submission, then we can all change our hearts at once, and make ourselves love

God and love man. But who can love by an effort of the will? Yet, if the new life is a gift, we have no power to procure it, and can only wait till God sees fit to send it; and how, then, can we be called upon to be converted?

Here is a difficulty which it seems to us Orthodoxy does not solve; and yet we think that a solution is to be found in a very simple distinction, which, like all other true and real distinctions, throws light on many other difficulties.

6. *Solved by the Distinction between Conversion and Regeneration.*— The distinction of which we speak is between repentance or conversion on the one side and regeneration or a new life on the other side. Repentance or conversion consists in renouncing all sin, and resolving to forsake it; in turning to God with the purpose of submitting to his will and obeying his law. This conversion or repentance is an act proceeding from the will in obedience to the conscience. This is what God commands, and what we can and ought to do. Every conscientious person, every person who is endeavoring to do right and is ready to act up to his light, is a converted person. Every one who hates his sins, resists temptation, watches and prays against it, is a penitent person. This is the great, broad distinction between man and man. This divides all men into two classes,— those who, in their will and purpose, are for God, truth, and right; and those who, because they are not *for* God, are really against him.

But besides this broad distinction there is another secondary distinction,— a distinction among those who are conscientiously endeavoring to do God's will. Among the *converted* there are two classes, the regenerate and the unregenerate. A man may be converted, and not be regenerate; for a man may repent of his sin and turn

toward God, and yet not have the life of love and joy which we have described.

He is under law, not under grace. He is struggling to do right, but is not borne forward on a joyful tide-wave of love.

7. *Men may be divided, religiously, into Three Classes, not Two.*— If this be so, we may divide men into three classes, and not into two. The first class is of those who are neither converted nor regenerate; the second, who are converted, but not regenerate. The first are like the prodigal in the parable, living without God; the second, like the hired servants in the same story, serving God for wages; the third are sons, serving from love, ever with their Father, and all that he has is theirs. The motive of the first class is selfish will, selfish pleasure; the motive of the second is duty; that of the third, love. The first are without law, the second under law, the third under grace. And so we might multiply distinctions. But is it not clear to common observation that this threefold classification meets the facts of life better than the other? There are three degrees of character. There is the worldly man, who is just as good or bad as society around him leads him to be; whose virtues result merely from a happy organization or fortunate influences, but who has no principle of goodness, no purpose of righteousness, no serious aim in life. Then there is the conscientious man, who means to live, and does live, by a standard of morality; who has a serious aim, but who is not yet deeply and joyfully religious; whose religion, at any rate, is hard work, not confiding, childlike faith. And there is the Christian believer who has begun to live from faith, who begins to feel a higher life pouring into his heart

from on high, who has help and strength from above. From his heart the burden has been lifted, and he has become again as a little child. He knows how to pray the prayer of faith. He may not be so very much better than the other in outward character, but he has the principle within him which will make all things new sooner or later.

The New Testament confirms this view of a threefold division. The Apostle Paul, who considers human nature to consist of three elements,— spirit, soul, and body,— divides mankind into the carnal man, the natural (psychical or soulish) man, and the spiritual man. The carnal man is he in whom the bodily instincts and appetites are supreme. "He is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." The natural man is he in whom the *soul* is supreme: he is neither carnal on one side nor spiritual on the other. "He cannot receive the things of the spirit of God"; yet he is not in opposition and hostility to them like the carnal man, whose mind is enmity against God.

Still more plainly does the apostle indicate the distinction when speaking of those who are without law, those who are under law, and those who are free from law and above it. The first state he describes in such words as these: "I was alive without the law once,"— the glad, natural life and freedom before conscience is developed. But conscience does awake in all: "The commandment came, sin revived, and I died." When man sees that he ought to serve God, yet continues to serve the flesh and the world, he is spoken of as dead in sin; for all the principle of progress ceases. But, if he does endeavor to do right, then Paul speaks of him as *under law,* and on his way to a higher state. That higher state he speaks of as

being "delivered from the law, to serve in newness of spirit, and not in oldness of letter."

Thus we see that all religious experiences coincide. The experience of the Apostle Paul is exactly the same in its essentials with that of every soul, however humble, that begins and goes forward in the Christian life.

If this distinction between conversion and regeneration be correct, it removes the difficulty in the orthodox statement.

8. *Difference between Conversion and Regeneration.*— Conversion is an act, regeneration an experience. "Turn ye, turn ye; why will ye die?" is the command of the Old Testament. "Repent, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." "Repent, and be baptized, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost," is the command of the New Testament. It is a duty to repent; but to become regenerate is not a duty: *that* is a gift to be received afterward. God commands conversion. He bestows regeneration. Submission is an act of our own: faith is the gift of God. A change of outward life and conduct we can accomplish ourselves, at least we can endeavor to accomplish it; but the change of heart God himself will bestow.

Conversion, a turning round, is necessarily instantaneous: it is a change. But regeneration, or reception of divine love, is a state not sudden, but passing by gradations into a deeper and deeper life of faith and joy.

So, too, conversion may be repeated: we may often find that we have again turned round, and are going the wrong way. But the inflow of life when begun cannot be begun again. When God has touched the heart with his love, it is forever lifted by that divine experience beyond

the region of mere law. We can never forget it. These are the

> "Truths that wake,
> To perish never,—
> Which neither listlessness nor mad endeavor,
> Nor man nor boy,
> Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
> Can utterly abolish or destroy!"

And herein lies the basis of truth in the doctrine of the "perseverance of saints."